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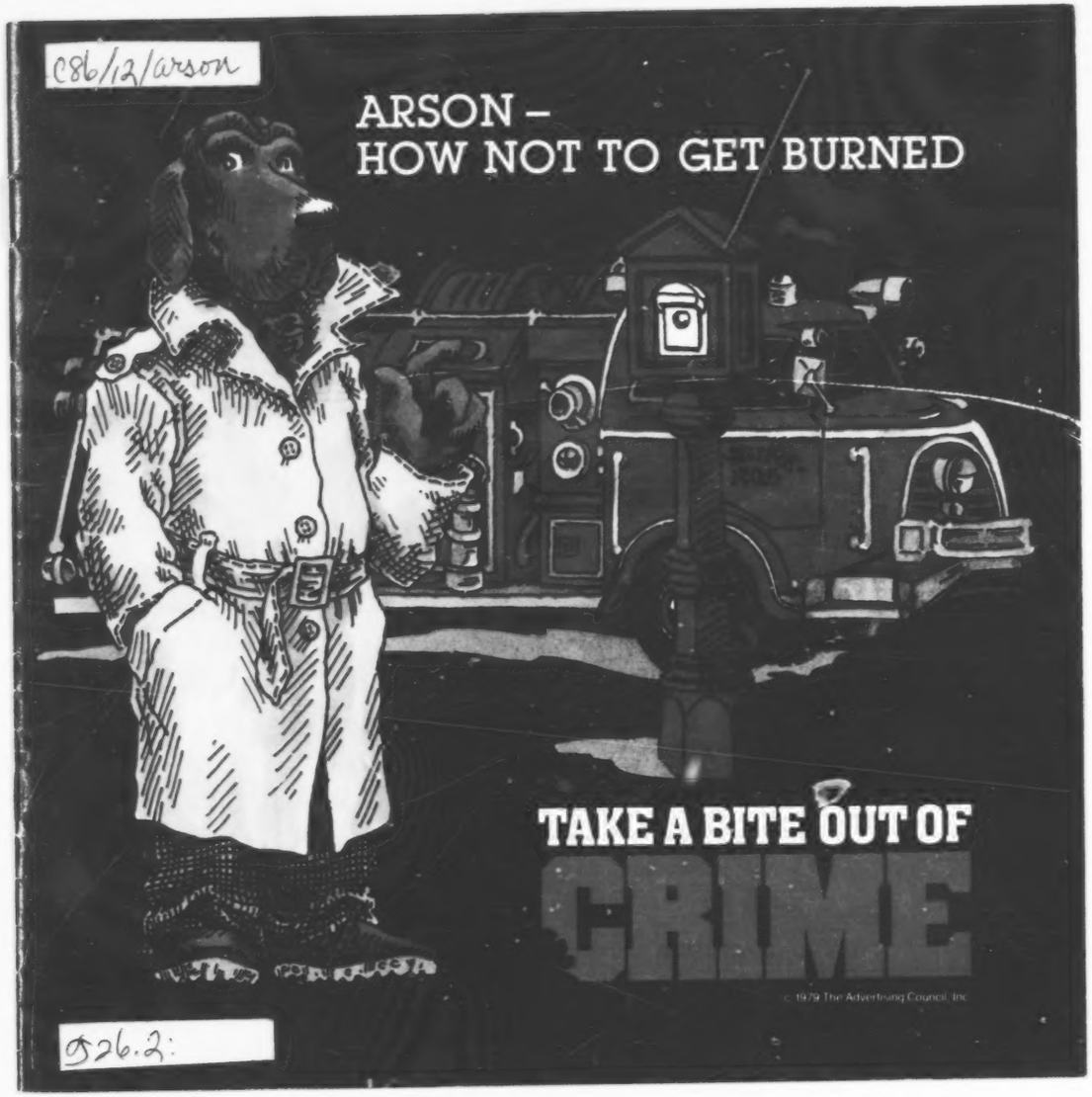
ARSON –
HOW NOT TO GET BURNED



TAKE A BITE OUT OF

CRIME

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"When someone burns property for destructive or harmful purposes or to defraud others, that's arson. It doesn't matter how large or small the property is. Usually, arsonists burn buildings, but they also torch cars or even trash cans.

It doesn't matter who owns the property, either. Sometimes landlords or businessmen burn their own buildings to collect insurance money.

What does matter is that people get hurt. Sure, it's the building that burns, but it's the people who suffer. Who wants to live in a neighborhood gutted by fire?

Let's stop our neighborhoods and businesses from getting burned! You'll be helping me and a lot of other folks . . .

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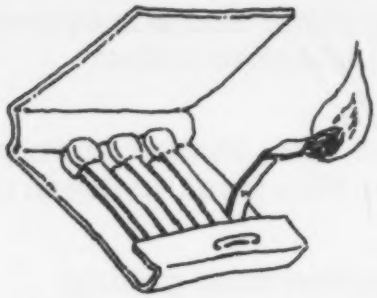
"Arson. It's always been a serious crime. But it hasn't always been a serious national problem. It is now. Look at the facts:"



- Arson is the fastest-growing crime: between 1965 and 1975 reported arson fires increased 425%.
- In 1978 alone, arson killed more than 1,000 people.
- Property losses from arson totaled more than $1 billion in 1978.
- An estimated 212,000 arson cases occurred in 1978, with an average $6,533 lost in each fire – higher than for any other major crime.
- A typical city of 100,000 might expect to have about 100 arson fires a year.

The Impact

The impact of arson can be shattering. Even if no one is killed, people may lose homes and possessions and suffer a terrifying experience.

But that's only the beginning. Arson can ruin a neighborhood and speed the decay of an entire city. Once a neighborhood becomes a target for arsonists, a climate of fear spreads. Some people move out; others stay behind, hoping that their buildings will be spared. As people leave, few move in to replace them.

The result? More abandoned buildings that attract vandals. Merchants lose customers, and some close their stores. People lose jobs. Insurance rates go up. In some high-risk neighborhoods, residents can't get standard insurance policies at any price. While special coverage (FAIR Plans) may be available, the coverage may not be as extensive as standard policies. The city loses tax revenues because property values drop, businesses close, and people are out of work. At the same time, the city has to pay for more fire fighters and equipment to combat arson. And if schools or other public buildings are burned, additional tax dollars are needed to repair or rebuild them. The bottom line? Higher tax rates on a shrinking tax base.

"One way or another, arson affects the whole community. Why would anyone want to commit this crime? Some of the reasons may surprise you."

The Motives

Most arson fires are set by vandals or by people who are "getting even" with someone – not by professional "torches." Despite what many people think, insurance fraud accounts for only a small percentage of arson fires. But dollar losses from this type of fire may account for a disproportionate amount of a community's total losses to arson.

Most vandalism fires are set by teenagers who get a kick out of destroying property or who like the excitement of the fire and the fire engines. Arson for revenge may follow a violent quarrel, a bitter argument between lovers, or the firing of an employee who vows to get back at the company.

Insurance fraud fires are usually set by professionals. Landlords may burn their own property because they are losing money on it. Unable to make a profit or sell the building, they arrange for the building to burn "accidentally" and collect the insurance.

Cities with declining populations are the most likely to have high arson rates. As people leave a city, there are more abandoned buildings to attract vandals. Those who stay tend to be poorer than those who leave, making it harder for landlords to collect enough rent to cover costs. Some may resort to arson as a way out.

READEX FICHE

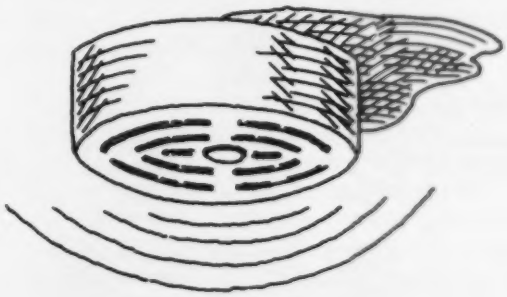
What You Can Do to Prevent Arson

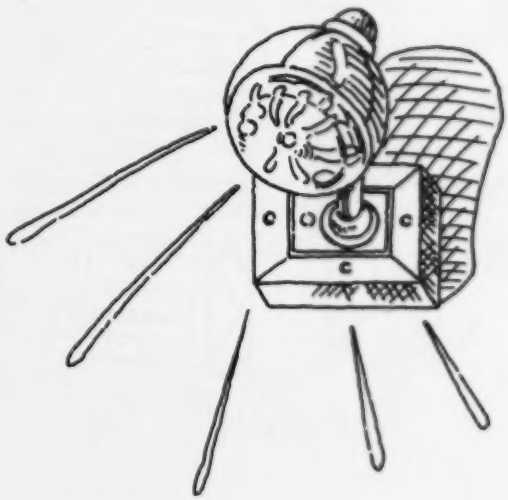
Protect Your Property

- Put away or dispose of materials that could be used to start fires. Store cans of gasoline or other flammable liquids under lock and key.
- Clean up piles of rubbish – old rags, boards, newspapers, etc. – that could be set afire.
- Keep your property well lighted; arson fires are often set under cover of darkness.
- Install smoke alarms in your home or business. There are many inexpensive and effective brands. Your fire department may be able to tell you what to look for in an alarm system.

Inform the Authorities

- If you have any information about a suspicious fire, report it to the arson squad or to the police immediately. Only about 5 percent of all arson cases result in conviction, usually because information is lacking. Being a witness for the prosecution is most helpful, but anonymous tips can also help investigators.





What Your Neighborhood Can Do

If there have been arson fires in your neighborhood, **organize an arson prevention and detection program.** Make it known that residents are watching for signs of arson. The more active and visible your organization, the better your chances of deterring potential arsonists.

"In 1976 a young boy died in an apartment fire on Symphony Road in Boston, the twenty-second suspicious fire in that area in 2 years. That same night Symphony Road residents met and decided to put a stop to the burning. The Symphony Tenants Organization Project (STOP), as they called themselves, looked into the histories of buildings that had burned. They helped authorities uncover an arson-for-profit ring responsible for as many as 35 fires that had destroyed $6 million worth of property. Some 33 people were arrested, including a retired fire chief, a police officer, attorneys, insurance adjustors, and real estate operators. Shows you what a community can do when people fight crime together!"

Inform the fire department or other public authorities. If your city has an arson squad (usually part of the fire department), that's your best contact. If no arson squad exists, the central office of the fire department is a good starting point. Depending on the kind of information you have, the police department or housing inspector's office may be good contacts, too.

- If there are abandoned buildings in your neighborhood, report them to city housing authorities. Insist that they be boarded up or torn down.
- Keep an eye on potential targets like vacant buildings, schools, and construction sites. If you see any suspicious activity – for example, teenagers inside buildings where they do not belong – notify the arson squad or police.

"Neighborhood block clubs in Hartford are working to snuff out arson. Block clubs search official records and keep files on all buildings in their area. If they spot any arson warning signs – such as absentee owners and empty apartments, back taxes, and code violations – the block clubs take action. Owners are asked to fix up their properties; bank and housing officials may be alerted, too. The block club may even help the owner find a buyer willing to take over the property. They figure arson's no way out for anyone – owners, residents, or the city!"

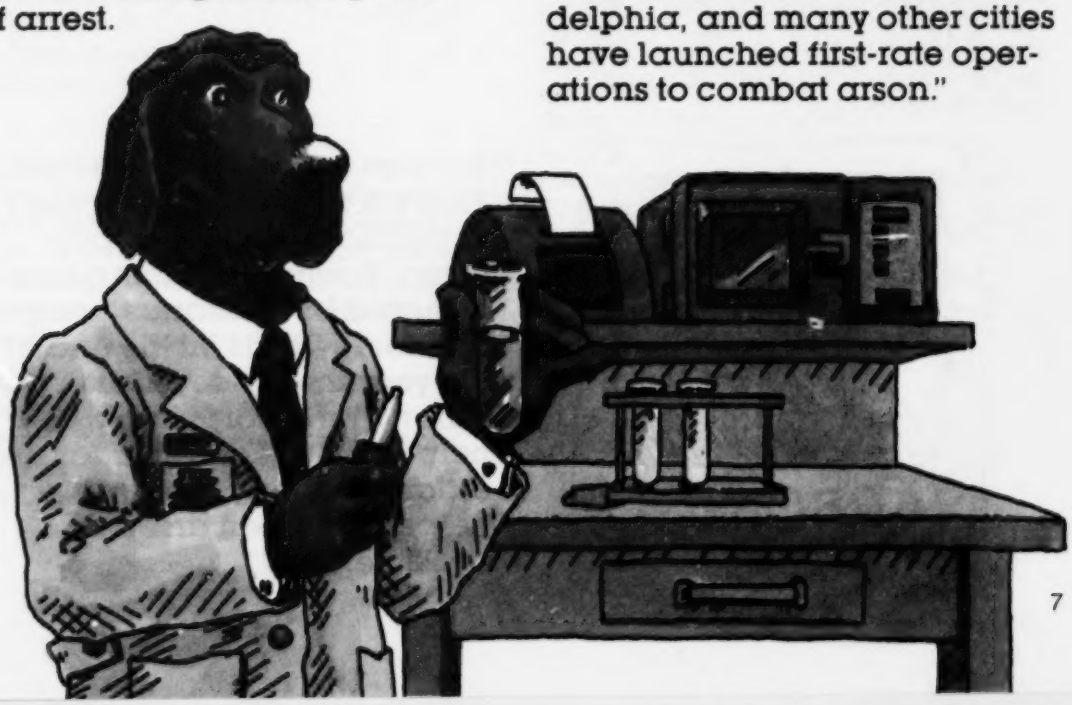
Support formation of an arson task force in your city. Many cities have task forces to plan and create anti-arson programs. The task force approach is effective because it brings together all the key agencies, organizations, and individuals – the fire and police departments, the prosecutor's office, building inspector, insurance companies, business and political leaders, and community representatives.

The task force usually starts by examining the arson problem and the resources available to combat the crime. Then it drafts a plan of action, defines responsibilities among member agencies, and gets the program under way. The task force may continue to oversee the program.

Support formation of an arson squad in your city. While the task force plans the city's overall approach to the problem, the arson squad actually examines suspicious fires and may conduct the resulting criminal investigations. Typically located in the fire department, arson squads often include police officers as well as trained fire investigators. An arson squad follows a case from the first inspection of the fire scene to the final verdict in court – providing evidence, expert assistance, and testimony. Though usually small – 4 or 5 members – arson squads can be very effective.

"Seattle used to have a terrible arson problem. Losses were skyrocketing: from $600,000 in 1971 to more than $3 million in just part of 1974. That year the fire chief set up an arson squad made up of 10 "combat fire fighters" and police detectives. He gave them weeks of intensive training on everything from arson detection equipment to basic law enforcement. Each squad member also was given the power of arrest.

That's not all. The city set up a task force that included everyone with something to offer in the battle against arson. They divided the responsibilities among the police, the prosecutors, and the insurance industry. By 1976, losses dropped from more than $4 million to $1.9 million a year, and the following year they dropped again. Seattle is just one example of what a city can do. Denver, Houston, New Haven, Philadelphia, and many other cities have launched first-rate operations to combat arson."



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Support Adoption of Strategies to Combat Arson

If your community has an arson problem, urge officials to seize the initiative.

- Arson patrols by police or fire fighters in high-risk neighborhoods put potential arsonists on notice.
- Media campaigns to heighten public awareness help mobilize community resources and increase the flow of information about arson from the authorities to the community.
- Fire safety education for youngsters combined with "ride along" programs help demonstrate the danger and destruction of arson. Fire department personnel may also identify children with fire-setting tendencies and refer them to counseling. Publicizing this service encourages parents to refer their children for help.
- Reward programs for information leading to the arrest and conviction of arsonists have proved successful in a number of cities. In Los Angeles and Seattle insurance companies have supplied reward money. Informants can remain anonymous.
- Arson hotlines, publicized through the media and often linked to reward programs, enable people to get information through to the arson squad immediately. To permit callers to remain anonymous and still collect a reward if the information proves valuable, the hotline operator may assign callers a two-part code number. When the case is solved, the first part of the number is publicized. The informant then calls in the second part.

"Burn an arsonist for cold cash. That's the slogan Dallas used to publicize its reward program. Each year a lump sum is donated by insurance companies for rewards. At the end of the year the money is divided among the informants who helped solve cases. Dallas fire officials report this effort helped dampen arson fires by 28 percent!"

For Information and Assistance

- Recently, 35 states, counties, and cities received funds to create arson task forces, train arson investigators, and teach people how to put a damper on this crime. The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration coordinates the Federal anti-arson campaign. Participating Federal agencies include the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the U.S. Fire Administration, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms of the U.S. Treasury Department. Contact:

  Law Enforcement Assistance Administration
  U.S. Department of Justice
  Washington, D.C. 20531

- The U.S. Fire Administration, part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, works to reduce the nation's losses caused by fire. As part of its anti-arson effort, USFA is producing an Arson Action Guide, the first of five manuals to help neighborhood groups understand and stop arson. Contact:

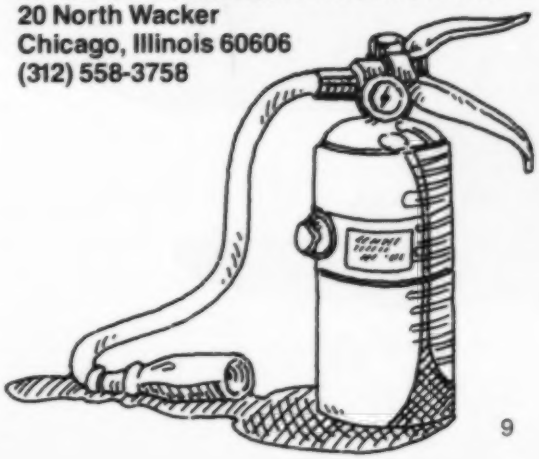
  United States Fire Administration
  Office of Planning and Education
  Federal Emergency Management Agency
  2400 M Street, N.W.
  Washington, D.C. 20472

- The Anti-Arson Committee of Factory Mutual System awards grants of up to $10,000 per year to local groups interested in arson prevention. Funds support training programs, research efforts, equipment purchase, and general awareness programs. Liaison staff in each of the system's 18 districts help local groups develop arson prevention programs. Contact:

  Anti-Arson Committee
  Factory Mutual System
  1151 Boston-Providence Turnpike
  Norwood, Massachusetts 02062
  (617) 762-4300

- The Insurance Committee for Arson Control will assist individuals in developing arson control task forces. A resource packet is available that includes information on task forces nationwide and policy guidelines for task force formation. Contact:

  Insurance Committee for Arson Control
  20 North Wacker
  Chicago, Illinois 60606
  (312) 558-3758



"With a little help from you and your neighbors, we can keep our neighborhoods from getting burned. How about it? Let's not give the torches a chance. Let's . . .

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Organizations Participating in the Crime Prevention Coalition

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American Association of Retired Persons
Boy Scouts of America
Bureau of Justice Statistics
Federal Bureau of Investigation
General Federation of Women's Clubs
Insurance Information Institute
International Society of Crime Prevention Practitioners
Law Enforcement Assistance Administration
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
National Association of Attorneys General
National Association of Counties
National Association of Criminal Justice Planners
National Association of Social Workers
National Center for Community Crime Prevention
National Conference of Christians and Jews
National Congress of Parents and Teachers
National Council on Crime and Delinquency
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National Council of Senior Citizens
National Crime Prevention Institute
National Criminal Justice Association
National District Attorneys Association
National Education Association
National Exchange Club
National Governors Association, Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Protection
National Institute of Justice
National League of Cities
National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives
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U.S. Conference of Mayors
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